MY FIRST TWENTY YEARS

Twenty years. A long time to continue anything. I started **Comix World** in October of 1973 when I was a different person and many of the underground cartoonists I had come to consider friends were still alive and excited about what they were doing. In 1973, many still thought the Age of Aquarius was real, that they were on a journey that would end in a unified country where the ideals expressed in the early days of American history would be realized. I won't go into what happened politically, but will focus on what happened in and to the comix world as we moved through the seventies and eighties and up to the present.

From the beginning my conception of Comix World was one of unity. I felt that those of us who collect, read, praise, analyze, criticize, and perpetuate comic books, along with those who draw, publish, and distribute them, constitute a comics community, an international subculture. Whatever our professions and however we may disagree politically, however diverse our social classes, we are united in our support for the world of comics and our appreciation for those who create them.

Just as the late Dave Sheridan always referred to comix as the "People's fine art," I have always considered Comix World a People's Almanac. I kept track of cartoonists the establishment ignored and, however critical I was, I always supported the form and anyone who chose to work in it. I was an advocate of comixology. I wanted to see the form taken seriously. I tried to get Phil Donahue and other talk show hosts to include people from the world of comic art and animation. I could never see that the most trivial observation by some ham actor was worth national attention while the comments of cartoonists were routinely ignored. Even today when characters have entered the hypestream, cartoon people get no satisfaction. Kill off Superman, send out press releases, and rake in the bucks from a generation who never saw the golden age of the character.

What do I mean by serious? I mean it is just as relevent to write an article or monograph about a character like Fritz the Cat as one about a character created by William Faulkner for an obscure novel. A dissertation on the evolution of the superhero or the treatment of women in comic book fiction is just as valid historically and sociologically as the tons of print spent annually on obsolete British poetry and Jacobean drama. I think it is more important for people to study images that survive for years in the public psyche rather than eclectic subjects one never thinks of after college graduation. In graduate school, I wrote a dissertation on the minor novels of Thomas Hardy and since turning that tome in to my professor I haven't given Hardy much thought. I have yet to meet anyone outside the academy who has heard of any of those quaint novels. I can talk about Superman and Lois Lane with anyone and get a response, though most adults will say, *well, I've seen the movies.*

I sorted my newsletters the other night and came up with 370 to date. There were 237 issues of *Comix World* though the last one is numbered 238. I misnumbered. There was no 230. In the *Comix Wave* series I started in 1983, there are 133 right now, because I just pasted up 132 and there were two 83s. Dating the letters is tricky because I was not too organized years ago. I was always monthly but sometimes I did four or five in a single month. This is why I finally started numbering them with the year. I didn't want to be held to a strict schedule anymore than I wanted to use the same format all the time, but I was stuck with the 8 1/2 x 11" sheet because of the technology available. I did one 8 1/2 x 14" issue [#7, the one with Shelton's cat logo on it], but I didn't like the legal paper. I did several issues pasted up so they could be folded into mini-comics, but that was extra work and I got complaints from the anal compulsives about it so I gave in and settled down to my current 8 1/2 x 11 two sided format. I still get complaints from the three-hole binder people, but all I can say to them is to have them side bound like I do. Most readers probably toss them out so I am only talking to serious collectors and research people like myself here. I publish one issue a month now and will probably do 12 this year. For the collector who would like this information in one place, I offer a bound set of all the letters to date for $50 plus postage, which will run about $7 because it's heavy. I have not indexed the newsletters, but **Gary Usher** has, so if you are interested in the index, drop me a note and we'll see what kind of deal can be made. The index print-out probably weighs more than the bound set of back issues.

Why did I do the newsletter and why have I kept it up long past the point where most newsletters and fan/collector publications have bitten the dust? The first *Comix World* column appeared in Richard Kyle's *Graphic Story World* and I just sent him a column. It was his title, so he originated the name. There was no logo. The first logo drawn especially for CW was by Carl Spahn for a column that ran in John Bryan's 1972 paper, the San Francisco *PHOENIX*. Kim Deitch drew the first one for the newsletter. My early columns about comix appeared in underground newspapers and fanzines, mainly in the Los Angeles *FREE PRESS* and in *GSW* which became *Wonder World*. A series of Underground comix reports which I did for the *FREEP* stimulated the creation of the CW newsletter. I was encouraged by the publishers of the comix who realized this would be free publicity for their product.

In the first CW I stated the policy I would follow and when I read it over today it's pretty solid. At the end of the 1960's, the hub of Bay Area underground comix activity was Gary Arlington's San Francisco Comic Book Store in the Mission district. Any Saturday afternoon you would find people like Kim Deitch, Robert Crumb, Spain, Larry Todd, Vaughn Bodé, Roger Brand, Joel Beck, and countless others wandering in and out. They passed along gossip about each other and their activities and talked about the latest books in progress, who was drawing what for what title and who was publishing the book and when it would be out. I might run into Bill Griffith and Jay Kinney and hear about the latest issue of *Young Lust*, their parody romance title. Roger Brand would tell me about his plan to do his own comic books, *Real Pulp* and *Tales of Sex and Death*. Someone might mention the latest issue of *Yellow Dog* and there would be a collective moan because *YD*, while a paying market, had a low rep among the cartoonists. If you couldn't get into *Zap* or one of the "good" books, you gave your stuff to *YD*. Brand and Greg Irons were forever telling me how they hated figuring out new ways for "that fucking dog to piss on the back cover." *Yellow Dog* began as a tabloid from Berkeley's Print Mint and was to be the West Coast answer to *Gothic Blimpworks*, the comic tab published in New York by *The East Village Other*, but it never made the grade.

Gary was an ex-Army supply sergeant, an amiable guy who had two full collections of EC comics. For him underground comix meant a revival of the best of the EC horror line that Fred Wertham and the industry Comic book code of 1954 had put out of business. Gary printed his ad as a tabloid he called *Eric Fromm's Comics and Stories*. He published some horror titles like *Bogeyman* and *San Francisco Comic Book* and he wanted to publish others but never had enough money. It was Gary who came up with the titles for what became *Skull* and *Slow Death Funnies* when Ron Turner of the Berkeley Ecology Center decided to put out a comic book. There was a bit of rivalry between Ron and Gary, but they were friends. Ron borrowed some money from his dad and started what became Last Gasp Eco-Funnies in 1970 and after he got his ecology comic book into print he decided to do some more comic books. Before long he was in the business. Ron's motto was *Mind Candy for the Masses*. There were four companies in the Bay Area at that time, early 1970. Gary ran one of them. Don and Alice Schenkor and Bob and Peggy Rita ran The Print Mint in Berkeley. Their company grew out of a counter which sold posters in Moe Moscowitz' bookstore. The Texans, mainly Gilbert Shelton, Fred Todd, Jack Jackson [Jaxon], and Dave Moriaty started Rip Off Press in 1969, and Bill Bagley ran Company & Sons out of a warehouse in

CLAY GEERDES **COMIX WAVE** 134
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San Francisco. Last Gasp became a fifth viable underground comic book company, one destined to outlast the others. Arlington and Bagley dropped out early in the game, leaving three Bay Area Companies. There were companies in other parts of the U.S., mainly Krupp Comic Works in Wisconsin, Cloud Studios in New York and the Los Angeles Comic Book Company, but only Krupp survived to the nineties, the others are memories. I saw the comics produced by these companies, but had little personal contact with the people who ran them although I met them all at conventions over the years. I mention this because people outside the Bay Area have accused me of bias which I don't deny completely, but I feel I have covered all of the comix in the newsletter and offer the letters themselves as evidence. If I have not included in-depth biographical information on artists who live elsewhere it is because they have not answered my queries and chose not to be included in my columns. I have kept my correspondence files and know who has and has not communicated with me during the tenure of CW.

There was always a lot of shop talk at Gary's store. Most of the cartoonists were making very little money and few had anything good to say about the publishers when they were gossiping. This requires explanation. Life was not supposed to be about money in the hip community around the Bay Area in 1970. The idea was to find out what you like to do, to do your own thing, to stay high and get by, but in spite of all the hip jargon the money to pay the rent and buy the art supplies had to come from somewhere and that somewhere was usually one of the record or comic companies. Cartoonists I knew were making their living doing rock posters, ads, coloring books, spot illos, and comic books. While all the companies wanted anything Crumb drew, newcomers did not fare so well, particularly if they were not drawing within certain thematic parameters. The graphic territory was claimed quite early and doors that were open in 1970 were closed by 1972.

Reality for an artist is trying to meet deadlines and trying to get advances and royalties out of publishers. One of the things that made underground art possible in the Bay Area was the extended hip community and the low rents. A few people could rent an old Victorian house in Haight-Ashbury and live quite well on very little money. There were art and music and baking collectives or communes and an endless gaggle of therapies hyping this or that ism or ology. You could get rolfed in the morning and go for a primal screaming session in the afternoon and still make the early set at the Fillmore Ballroom where you might score a free copy of the latest Wes Wilson or Greg Irons poster. Life was anything but expensive. It was $2.50 to get into the Fillmore. Compare that with the $18-35 dollar concerts of today. My rent when I lived in Haight-Ashbury was $165 a month and my wife and I had the entire bottom floor of a beautiful Victorian house on Ashbury Street several doors up from what we called the *Dead* house because Jerry Garcia lived there. Actually, it was a commune and the rent was shared by who knows how many people. Whenever I walked down to the Haight there were half a dozen people sitting with their feet hanging out of the upstairs windows. Bands like the Dead and the Jefferson Airplane had just begun to make some money and I remember one afternoon seeing Jack Cassidy drive up in front of the Dead house in a new red Mustang convertible with the top down. People hung out at the various coffeehouses or just stood around on the street in old clothes they got out of the second hand shops for next to nothing. The antique hustle had not started and you could buy old movie magazines for a dime. Such a short period. It wasn't long before everything was about money again. I saw my first underground comix at the Psychedelic Shop on Haight. Zap, Feds N' Heads, Joel Beck's "The Profit," and one of Rory Hayes' Bogeyman comix. The guy was hung up on EC horror. Liked to draw pictures of weird, threatening teddy bears. He worked at Gary Arlington's store and I'd stop by to say hi to him and Larry Rippee and Sharon Heavey. She was the woman who did the greeting cards and later went into erotic movies. Rory overdosed on something. He was about 36.

Gary Arlington befriended a lot of cartoonists who came to the Bay Area from New York. Kim Deitch stayed with him when he came out in 1969. Gary gave Rory and Simon Deitch jobs in his store and loaned money to people. When the artists didn't need money, they traded Gary artwork for EC comics. They could, of course, sell these to other comic stores in the area if the need arose, but many were collectors who would have to get pretty hungry before parting with a *Vault of Horror*.

I collected the undergrounds as they came out and added them to the collections of earlier comics I have. I was always interested in all of the comics and I used to get mail from strictly anti-Establishment underground neo-revolutionary hippies who rejected Marvel and DC comics as fascist propaganda and told me I should only write about undergrounds. I got mail from all kinds of people once I started advertising CW in Alan Light's *Buyer's Guide* and other zines. Didn't bother me. I still cherish my Smokey Stovers and Little Lulus and Human Torches and Plastic Mans and Jingle Jangles and Uncle Scrooges. I have a lot of great comic books and while I enjoy the Zaps and Freak Brothers and Snarfs and Skulls, I'm not going to give up the good stuff associated with my childhood in order to be comically correct. Nor am I going to negate the interesting comics that have come from the East Coast in the post-underground period. I enjoyed Berni Wrightson's Swamp Thing and Neal Adams' Deadman and Barry Smith's Conan and Steranko's Nick Fury as well as Kirby's Kamandi and Demon and these days I am enjoying the brilliant writing of Peter Milligan in the revival of Ditko's Shade.

It has yet to be noted in the comic histories how strong and pervasive the influence of the undergrounds was on everything that has happened in comic books since *Zap*. The undergrounds opened a door that had been closed since the Code of 1954. Underground writers and artists owned their own characters and the copyrights to their own books. They drew anything and everything that came into their heads and were never censored by editors or publishers. They had the kind of artistic freedom that had been unknown in comics since the new trend of EC under Bill Gaines. When we held the first underground con in Berkeley in April of 1973, younger writers and artists like Jim Starlin, Mike Friedrich, Frank Brunner, and Steve Engelhart came to participate and it was that year that Friedrich began to think about a middle ground that would involved both over and underground artists. There were many Marvel and DC artists who envied the underground artists their artistic license as well as their control over their characters and it would not be long before the term alternative comics was making the rounds. When he formed Star*Reach, Mike Friedrich used the term ground-level comics. I worked with him on the first couple of issues of his newsletter in 1977, transcribing interviews with Steve Leialoha and P. Craig Russell. Friedrich went on to form an agency that works with artists and he continues to work with Wonder Con.

QUOTE, UNQUOTE...

HARPER'S, in case you're not a reader of that mag, loves to publish random weirdness in a section of *Readings*. Anything can appear there from memos and private letters to quotations from magazines. **HARPER'S** uses this section for humor and irony the way I do the various fragments I paste in **CW**, but not everyone can take a joke. Knopf editor Gordon Lish recently sued **Harper's** for publishing parts of a letter sent to prospective students of a writing class he teaches. Lish accused Harper's of making him sound "pretentious, if not bizarre," and a Federal court judge awarded him two grand. All of which proves you can often make more money suing a magazine than you can writing for it. If anyone would like to publish one of my letters for two g's, raise you checkbook now.

The second issue of Bruce Stengl's **RABBITBOY** is $1/stamp from him, 633 King St., Apt. 13, Santa Rosa, CA 95404.

Check out Rick Geary's latest, **BLANCHE GOES TO NEW YORK**. At your local comic book store.

Guy Colwell, always the innovator, is having a showing of his latest paintings in a Rec Vee [recreational vehicle]. February 14, 15, and 16, 1993. Info: 916-885-6042. Guy refers to his work as Traditional Social Realism.

TOONTOWN OPENS IN DISNEYLAND

Toontown, the newest land to open within Disneyland in 20 years, opened Tuesday, January 27, 1993. It's a gigantic funhouse with a lot of irritating gags, but visually interesting.